

TO STRUGGLE AGAINST AND TO BUILD WITH: WHAT DOES STUDENT ACTIVISM IN DELHI MEAN FOR PATHWAYS TO JUSTICE?

📅 February 24th, 2016 👤 Saurabh Arora 💬 2 Comments



At the weekend, Umar Khalid, one of the six student activists accused

in Delhi's 'anti-nationalism scandal' unfolded by the Hindu nationalist government of Prime Minister Modi, returned to the campus of Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU).

In a *rousing speech* on Sunday night, he made a persuasive case for "anti-nationals of the world [to] unite". Echoing *Rohith Vemula*, Umar called on all of us to be "not reduced to our immediate identities" but to instead connect with others who are also struggling for justice. Having been repeatedly painted as an 'Islamic terrorist' in the media over the last 10 days, he said that he was being 'made to feel that he was a Muslim,' something he hadn't felt during seven years of student activism at JNU.

Without denying the differences that exist within the student movement, and acknowledging the need to debate them while giving others the space to express their viewpoints, to organise their own gatherings, Umar called for *togetherness to stop the forces of oppression*. These 'forces' include current governmental elites, their supporters in the media and within universities, and the 'global' bodies (such as the WTO and large corporations) they bow down to.

He argued that these forces' encroachment into and attempted destruction of crucial spaces, such as JNU, where dissent is expressed and nurtured, must be checked. Not a single inch of JNU will be given away, Umar enthusiastically exclaimed, if dissent and resistance remain strong.

No doubt Umar is right to point to the importance of struggle, even if it is protracted and difficult, to protect spaces such as JNU. He is also right to highlight the importance of struggle against injustices that are perpetrated regularly against the already-marginalized across India. I found myself agreeing with nearly everything he had to say and fully support, in my small capacity as a 'distant' scholar, his call for

building bridges across divergence, and to wage multi-pronged struggles against power that is dispersed across the state, corporate, media and university worlds.

Also, now that it appears likely that activists in India, and in solidarity other anti-nationalists like me, are getting into what seems like a long struggle against the oligarchic *Alliance* between media, the state and large corporate interests, I am concerned that we might need more than a focussed oppositional struggle to survive the Alliance's authoritarian rule. While the Alliance is currently underpinned by Hindutva of the ruling BJP, it may in the future, perhaps in a slightly less tyrannical form, be led by the 'secular' Congress and its partners.

Umar's speech, I feel, pointed to yet another importance of resistance as oppositional struggle, against closing down of our subjectivities to "our immediate identities". We must struggle to open up spaces in which we can build new identities, mixing our positive cultural backgrounds with others who are interestingly different from us.

Yet I feel that this **opening up** of our cultural identities requires more than the securing and enlargement of spaces in which we can nurture dissent. It also requires spaces in which we can *build* these identities, in ways that are not just defined against the forces we oppose and thus bear their imprint.

Beyond mixed and changing identities, in precarious times such as ours, we need to help build other possible social and material worlds, together with friends near and far who also care for such building. It is these worlds that will hopefully lay the foundations for justice more sustainably than the ones we currently inhabit. I fear that they will not be built on oppositional struggle alone.

So there is a risk that if we get fully absorbed in oppositional struggle,

we will be left with little time and attention to build other worlds. A dearth of such building would in fact make it easier for the Alliance to steamroll their technocratic and market-centred visions over our villages, towns and cities, over our universities, workplaces and homes. This attempted steamrolling will surely be opposed, but we have to go further.

Oppositional struggle, by definition and by need, is directed *against* oppression. Perhaps one of its most important ingredients is anger, directed against the oppressor(s). Arguably, in order to be effective, such a struggle has to transform and channel into resentment and rage the love and solidarity that sustains it.

Yet we also desperately need to make the love last, the solidarity survive, the care for significant others we collaborate *with* thrive – in order to (re)build and multiply ‘**lines of flight**’ out of oppression. Such lines of flight are often orthogonal to the for-against axis on which oppositional struggles are waged.

This is not an either/or trade-off between struggling and building. Struggling is without doubt essential to carve spaces of freedom, as the efforts of activists like Umar and many more around the world amply show. Such spaces may even be crucial for building other possible worlds that I think are necessary for getting us out of our current predicament, both environmentally and socially. But this struggle needs to be complemented with relational efforts focussed on building new worlds, inch by inch, nurtured by care and love for significant others and by commitment to wider social and ecological justice.

This article was edited on 26 February 2016 to insert a reference to Rohith Vemula’s words on ‘immediate identities’.

Image: [statue of Jawharlal Nehru at JNU](#) by @stepscentre on Instagram



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2 COMMENTS:



manoj says:

25th February 2016 at 5:51 pm

Dear Saurabh,

excellent analysis but in his speech Umar Khalid quoted Rohith Vemula, a Dalit PhD student who committed suicide at University of Hyderabad in Januray, 2016

“not reduced to our immediate identities”

Regards

[Reply](#)



Harley Pope says:

1st March 2016 at 5:17 pm

As someone who has made friends with many JNU-ites during my doctoral fieldwork in India, I find this situation sad and anger inducing, and almost unbelievable.

I did not spend a lot of time on the campus, but I found it to be an exciting hub of political ideas and debate. As far as I’m aware, the level of debate that occurs at JNU is something that dwarfs what I have seen on UK campuses. It’s something that should be cherished, supported and cultivated.

It’s difficult to know what to do from the UK other than lend my vocal support for all those who are campaigning for justice.

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